

FRENCH SUSTAINABLE FASHION DIPLOMACY: SOFT POWER STRATEGIES IN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana Prancis memanfaatkan fashion berkelanjutan sebagai strategi diplomasi publik yang berorientasi pada soft power. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui studi kasus deskriptif, penelitian ini bertumpu pada data sekunder yang berasal dari dokumen kebijakan, laporan industri, indikator persepsi global, literatur akademik, dan pemberitaan media internasional. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa diplomasi fashion berkelanjutan Prancis tidak dapat dipahami sebagai bukti langsung meningkatnya pengaruh Prancis, melainkan sebagai sumber daya soft power yang bersifat terqualifikasi, melalui mana Prancis menghubungkan prestise budaya, kredibilitas regulasi, dan tanggung jawab lingkungan. Melalui *Anti-Waste for a Circular Economy Law*, *The Fashion Pact*, dan kebijakan *anti-fast fashion*, Prancis mengubah tata kelola fashion menjadi narasi ekologis yang terlihat secara internasional dan disirkulasikan melalui media, institusi fashion, jaringan transnasional, serta aktor non-negara. Namun, strategi ini tetap rentan terhadap tantangan kredibilitas, terutama *greenwashing* dan kemungkinan persepsi *eco-protectionism*. Artikel ini berkontribusi pada kajian Hubungan Internasional dengan menunjukkan bagaimana industri budaya tradisional dapat direposisi sebagai ruang pertemuan antara budaya, keberlanjutan, diplomasi publik, reputasi nasional, dan soft power.

Kata kunci: Prancis; Diplomasi Fashion Berkelanjutan; Soft Power; Diplomasi Publik; Reputasi Nasional

ABSTRACT

This article examines how France utilizes sustainable fashion as a soft power-oriented public diplomacy strategy. Using a qualitative descriptive case study approach, the research draws on secondary data from policy documents, industry reports, global perception indicators, academic literature, and international media coverage. The study argues that France's sustainable fashion diplomacy should not be understood as direct evidence of increased French influence, but rather as a qualified soft power resource through which France connects cultural prestige, regulatory credibility, and environmental responsibility. Through the *Anti-Waste for a Circular Economy Law*, *The Fashion Pact*, and *anti-fast fashion* measures, France transforms fashion governance into an internationally visible ecological narrative circulated through media, fashion institutions, transnational networks, and non-state actors. However, this strategy remains vulnerable to credibility challenges, particularly *greenwashing* and the possible perception of *eco-protectionism*. The article contributes to International Relations scholarship by showing how a traditional cultural industry can be repositioned as a site where culture, sustainability, public diplomacy, national reputation, and soft power intersect.

Keywords: France; Sustainable Fashion Diplomacy; Soft Power; Public Diplomacy; National Reputation

INTRODUCTION

Behind the glamour of *haute couture* and the prestige of Paris Fashion Week lies a public diplomacy narrative that positions sustainable fashion as a potential medium through which France projects cultural influence and normative leadership. As one of the big four fashion capitals of the 21st century alongside Milan, London, and New York (Vega, 2022). France serves not only as a global hub for the fashion industry

but also as a symbolic and institutional representation of French cultural diplomacy. The elegant, innovative, and prestigious image associated with the country is shaped not merely by the reputation of legendary fashion houses like Chanel, Dior, and Louis Vuitton, but also by strategic state efforts to position the fashion industry within its public diplomacy framework. Compared with more market-driven approaches often associated with countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, France demonstrates a more assertive state-led approach to sustainable fashion governance, making it a relevant case for examining eco-centric public diplomacy.

In recent decades, the global landscape has shifted significantly due to rising awareness of the climate crisis, production ethics, and sustainability. This transformation has compelled nation-states to reconstruct their soft power narratives to remain relevant and competitive in the eyes of the international public. Since 2020, France has further institutionalized sustainability principles within its fashion industry, positioning it beyond a mere industrial practice and increasingly linking it to its contemporary public diplomacy strategy.

France has positioned itself among the leading countries addressing the adverse impacts of fast fashion through the *Anti-Waste for a Circular Economy Law* (AGEC Law) enacted in 2020 (France, 2020), which bans the destruction of unsold goods and mandates environmental impact transparency on clothing labels. Additionally, France spearheaded *The Fashion Pact* in 2019 (*The Fashion Pact*, 2019), a voluntary coalition of global fashion companies aimed at reducing carbon emissions. This assertive approach was further solidified by the recent adoption of the June 2025 legislative amendment, which imposed an environmental penalty of up to 10 euros per item on ultra-fast fashion (*Sénat Français*, 2025). As the regulations enter their phased implementation by 2026, they present France as a potentially influential reference point for other nations navigating the transition toward a sustainable fashion industry. Within these dynamics, the sustainable fashion sector can be understood not merely as following market trends, but also as a cultural diplomacy instrument that carries political and normative messages.

These initiatives also illustrate how sustainable fashion operates as a form of public diplomacy. France does not communicate sustainability only through formal diplomatic channels, but also through regulatory frameworks, fashion institutions, luxury brands, designers, and global industry coalitions. In this sense, sustainable fashion becomes a communicative arena in which state and non-state actors jointly project an image of France as culturally prestigious, environmentally responsible, and normatively engaged in global sustainability debates.

By promoting a green lifestyle, ethical production, and eco-friendly innovation through fashion, France aligns itself with Sustainable Development Goal 12 on Responsible Consumption and Production (United Nations, 2015). Through this strategy, France seeks to reinforce its international appeal. This approach matches the concept of soft power, which is defined as a nation's ability to influence other actors through attraction rather than the coercion or force characteristic of previous eras.

To avoid treating soft power as an abstract or merely rhetorical concept, this study situates France's sustainable fashion diplomacy within selected perception-based indicators, namely the Global Soft Power

Index 2025, the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index 2023, and the RepCore® Nations 2025 ranking. These indicators are used not as direct causal proof of an increase in French soft power, but as contextual evidence for assessing how France's sustainability-oriented fashion diplomacy relates to broader patterns of soft power, national image, and country reputation.

In the Global Soft Power Index 2025, France was ranked sixth, following the United States, China, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Germany, indicating that France remains among the leading global soft power actors (Brand Finance, 2025). Moreover, Brand Finance's report highlights the relevance of sustainability to soft power through its Sustainable Future pillar, which evaluates environmental sustainability perceptions related to cities and transport, support for global climate action, green energy and technologies, and environmental protection. This strengthens the analytical relevance of sustainable fashion as a sector through which France's ecological commitments can be linked to broader indicators of reputation, influence, and international attractiveness.

To systematically assess this dynamic, this study captures France's contemporary reputational trajectory by contextualizing its soft power assets within broader global perception data across a recent multi-year window (2023–2025). This approach avoids relying on a single, isolated dataset and instead provides a more nuanced, macro-level view of the nation's shifting global standing. This is particularly relevant because France remains a highly recognized nation brand, although recent global perception rankings indicate a more complex and fluctuating reputational trajectory. In the 2023 Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index, France ranked eighth overall, its lowest recorded position, despite maintaining strong reputational standing in Culture, Tourism, and Exports (Ipsos, 2023). Similarly, the RepCore® Nations 2025 ranking places France 21st out of 60 countries, indicating that its immense cultural and symbolic prominence coexists with a more moderate overall country reputation profile. Therefore, sustainable fashion diplomacy should not be understood as definitive evidence of automatic soft power enhancement, but rather as a strategic attempt to address these reputational complexities and reinforce specific dimensions of national image, particularly cultural attractiveness, export identity, governance credibility, and ethical global leadership.

The study of French soft power has long been a focal point of scholarly inquiry. Lane (2013) and Avetisyan (2025) analyzed how France leverages cultural diplomacy instruments, such as language, education, tourism, and cultural institutions like the *Institut Français* and *Alliance Française*, to expand its global influence, while comparing the French soft power model with those of other nations. Within the context of creative industries, Dubé-Sénécal (2024) and Rana (2024) demonstrated that France has utilized *haute couture* and fashion weeks as instruments of prestige-based commercial diplomacy and as mediums for non-verbal political communication to project national identity and shape global public opinion. Meanwhile, the literature on sustainability in the fashion industry remains concentrated on technical and policy dimensions. Niinimäki *et al.* (2022), Mukendi *et al.* (2020), and Buchel *et al.* (2022) mapped circular business models, barriers to sustainable fashion consumption, and strategic transition pathways toward sustainable fashion in line with the *EU Circular Economy Action Plan*, without linking these elements to the functions of public diplomacy.

Although the aforementioned studies have made significant contributions to understanding French soft power, fashion diplomacy, and sustainable fashion policies independently, a notable gap persists in the literature regarding an integrative linkage of these three dimensions. Studies on French soft power generally focus on traditional cultural diplomacy instruments such as language, gastronomy, and cultural institutions, yet they fail to specifically analyze how the sustainability dimension of the fashion industry is integrated into contemporary public diplomacy strategies. Conversely, the literature on fashion diplomacy heavily emphasizes aesthetics, prestige, and nation branding without connecting them to the sustainability agenda as a state-promoted political value. Meanwhile, research on sustainable fashion tends to be technical and oriented toward environmental policy or consumer behavior, overlooking the diplomatic functions or international political influence projected by these sustainable practices.

Therefore, this study addresses this gap by analyzing sustainable fashion not merely as an industrial practice or environmental policy, but as a soft power-oriented public diplomacy strategy through which France seeks to project cultural influence, moral credibility, and normative leadership. Empirically, this study focuses on the period between 2019 and 2025, beginning with the launch of The Fashion Pact and continuing through the institutionalization of France's circular economy and anti-fast fashion policies. The year 2026 is treated only as a projected context for the phased implementation of the latest anti-ultra-fast fashion regulation. This article is guided by the following research question: How does France utilize sustainable fashion as a soft power-oriented public diplomacy strategy through policies, narratives, and actor involvement, and how can its relevance to national image formation be contextualized through selected perception-based indicators? Drawing on Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, Jan Melissen and Nicholas J. Cull's perspectives on public diplomacy, Ultimately, this study offers a new perspective on how ecological responsibility can be institutionalized as a diplomatic asset in contemporary public diplomacy.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical case study design to examine how France utilizes sustainable fashion as a soft power-oriented instrument within the framework of its public diplomacy. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study focuses on the interpretation of state narratives, symbolic representations, policy meanings, and diplomatic practices that cannot be fully explained through numerical measurement alone (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A case study design is also appropriate for examining a single case in depth within a specific political, institutional, and socio-cultural context (Yin, 2018). France was selected as the case study because of its position as a global fashion hub, its strong tradition of cultural diplomacy, and its increasingly assertive sustainability governance in the fashion sector.

Research data were collected through qualitative document analysis. The empirical corpus consists of 25 selected documents, mainly published between 2019 and 2025, while 2026 is used only as a projective context for the implementation of France's latest anti-ultra-fast fashion regulation. The documents were selected purposively based on their relevance to France's sustainable fashion policies, circular economy agenda, anti-fast fashion regulation, public diplomacy, soft power, nation branding, national image, and international reputation. The corpus includes French, European, and French-linked institutional or corporate documents; three global perception index reports, namely the Global Soft Power Index 2025,

the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index 2023, and RepCore® Nations 2025; academic journal articles and books; as well as credible industry and media reports such as Vogue Business, The Business of Fashion, Reuters, France 24, and Euronews.

Policy and institutional documents are used as primary sources for examining French domestic policy narratives, while the three global perception index reports are used as contextual data to understand France's position in relation to soft power, national image, and international reputation. These indices are not used to test causal relationships quantitatively, but rather as descriptive supporting evidence within the framework of qualitative analysis. Thus, this study does not conduct an original international public opinion survey or media sentiment analysis because its focus is on the qualitative analysis of policies, narratives, and stakeholder involvement.

The selection of documents was carried out through inclusion and exclusion criteria. Documents were included when they: (1) were issued between 2019 and 2025 or were relevant to the 2026 implementation projection; (2) discussed France's sustainable fashion policies, circular economy agenda, or anti-fast fashion regulations; (3) associated French fashion with sustainability, public diplomacy, soft power, national image, or nation branding; and/or (4) provided a theoretical basis or global perception data relevant to the research. Documents were excluded if they only addressed technical aspects of textile production that were irrelevant to diplomacy or national image, were not related to France, lacked institutional or academic credibility, were not available in full text, or did not contribute directly to the research question.

The unit of analysis in this research is textual or narrative segments found in the selected documents, such as policy statements, institutional narratives, report findings, and academic arguments related to sustainability, fashion diplomacy, soft power, public diplomacy, national image, and international reputation. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis through manual coding based on conceptual categorization, without qualitative data analysis software.

The coding process was conducted deductively based on three main themes derived from the theoretical framework of the research: (a) Soft Power Attraction, based on Joseph Nye; (b) Public Diplomacy Mechanisms, based on Jan Melissen and Nicholas J. Cull; and (c) Reputational Trajectory and Challenges, which focuses on credibility, international perception, greenwashing, eco-protectionism, and reputational risks. The first theme is used to examine how sustainable fashion is positioned as a source of French attraction. The second theme is used to analyze how sustainable fashion operates as an instrument of public diplomacy through regulation, international communication, media circulation, and transnational networks. The third theme is used to assess the challenges that may weaken the credibility, legitimacy, and international reception of French sustainable fashion diplomacy.

The analysis process was carried out in three stages. First, the documents were reviewed to identify text segments relevant to keywords such as "French fashion diplomacy," "sustainable fashion," "circular economy," "public diplomacy," "soft power," "nation branding," "environmental reputation," and "normative leadership." Second, the relevant segments were grouped into three main themes based on the coding framework. Third, these themes were interpreted to answer the research questions, namely how France

uses sustainable fashion as a soft power-based public diplomacy strategy and how its relevance to the formation of national image can be contextualized through global perception indicators.

To reinforce qualitative validity, this study uses source triangulation by cross-examining France's domestic policy narratives in policy and institutional documents with three global perception reports: the Global Soft Power Index 2025, the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index 2023, and RepCore® Nations 2025. Policy documents are used to identify French regulatory claims, strategies, and policy directions, while the global indices are used to examine whether these claims align with France's position and reputational challenges in international perception. This triangulation helps the research remain critical: sustainable fashion is not assumed to automatically increase France's soft power, but is analyzed as a public diplomacy strategy whose relevance is examined through policies, narratives, actors, and the context of global reputation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section analyzes French sustainable fashion diplomacy through five connected arguments. First, sustainable fashion is treated as a qualified soft power resource rather than as direct proof of increased French influence. Second, it is examined as a public diplomacy mechanism through which domestic regulation becomes international communication. Third, the role of transnational networks and non-state actors is assessed as a means of amplifying, mediating, and contesting France's ecological fashion narrative. Fourth, the analysis considers how sustainability contributes to the repositioning of French national identity from aesthetic hegemony toward ecological stewardship. Finally, the section evaluates two critical pressures that may weaken this diplomatic narrative: greenwashing and eco-protectionism.

Sustainable Fashion as a Source of French Soft Power

Sustainable fashion cannot be understood as automatic evidence that France has strengthened its global influence. More cautiously, it can be read as a sectoral mechanism through which France attempts to convert cultural prestige, regulatory credibility, and environmental commitment into a soft power resource. In Joseph Nye's framework, soft power refers to a country's ability to shape the preferences of other actors through attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2004). French sustainable fashion is relevant within this framework because it connects one of France's most globally recognized cultural assets, fashion, with contemporary international expectations regarding climate responsibility, ethical production, circular consumption, and environmental governance.

The empirical basis for this argument can be situated in the Global Soft Power Index 2025 published by Brand Finance. In the 2025 index, France ranks sixth globally after the United States, China, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Germany (Brand Finance, 2025). This ranking provides a measurable reference point for discussing France's position as a major soft power actor without relying only on abstract or normative claims. More importantly, the index assesses soft power not only through cultural visibility but also through perception-based pillars, including the Sustainable Future pillar. This pillar measures global perceptions of a country's environmental sustainability through indicators related to cities and transportation, support for global climate action, green energy and technology, and environmental protection (Brand Finance, 2025).

The Sustainable Future pillar is particularly relevant because it indicates that sustainability has become part of contemporary soft power evaluation. Brand Finance reports a strong correlation between a country's performance in the Sustainable Future pillar and its overall Reputation score, with a correlation of $r = 0.90$. The report also identifies correlations between Sustainable Future and Business and Trade influence ($r = 0.97$), as well as International Relations strength ($r = 0.92$) (Brand Finance, 2025). These indicators are not used here to prove a direct causal relationship between fashion policy and France's soft power ranking. Rather, they provide a perception-based macro context for assessing how France's sustainable fashion initiatives relate to broader measures of environmental credibility, reputation, economic influence, and international standing.

Within this context, initiatives such as The Fashion Pact, the Anti-Waste for a Circular Economy Law (AGEC Law), and anti-fast fashion regulation can be understood as sectoral practices that correspond to the values captured by the Sustainable Future pillar. The Fashion Pact, launched in 2019 in the context of the G7 Summit in Biarritz, gathered major fashion and textile companies around commitments to climate, biodiversity, and ocean protection (The Fashion Pact, 2019). Its relevance to soft power lies not in proving an immediate shift in international perception, but in showing how France positioned its fashion network as a platform for communicating environmental responsibility to global publics.

The AGEC Law, adopted in 2020, reinforces this connection between policy and perception. The law seeks to move France away from a linear "produce, consume, throw away" model toward a circular economy model that reduces waste and extends product life cycles (République Française, 2020). In the fashion sector, this is significant because debates over fashion sustainability increasingly focus on overproduction, unsold inventory, textile waste, and environmentally damaging consumption patterns. By prohibiting the destruction of unsold non-food goods and promoting circular economy principles, France creates a policy narrative that links fashion governance with environmental protection.

France's more recent efforts to regulate fast fashion and ultra-fast fashion extend this logic. Through proposed measures such as environmental penalties on highly polluting ultra-fast fashion products, advertising restrictions, and transparency requirements (France, 2022), France seeks to present itself not only as a hub of luxury fashion but also as a regulator of unsustainable consumption (Sénat Français, 2025). This matters for soft power because attraction depends on credibility. Cultural prestige becomes more persuasive when it is supported by visible policy commitments. In this sense, sustainable fashion bridges France's established cultural image and the environmental values increasingly recognized in global perception indexes.

The relationship between French fashion initiatives and the Global Soft Power Index should therefore be understood through a sector-to-macro logic. The index captures broad international perceptions of national soft power, while The Fashion Pact, the AGEC Law, and anti-fast fashion measures represent concrete sectoral practices. Sustainable fashion does not single-handedly determine France's sixth-place ranking. However, it contributes to the national narrative measured by the Sustainable Future pillar: the perception that a country supports climate action, encourages green innovation, and protects the

environment. This distinction avoids exaggerated causal claims while still showing how fashion policy can function as an empirical arena of soft power projection.

Through Nye's concept, the significance of sustainable fashion lies in the attempted conversion of cultural resources into attraction. France already possesses strong symbolic capital in fashion, but that capital becomes diplomatically meaningful only when it is linked to values and policies perceived as legitimate by external audiences. Sustainable fashion expands French cultural appeal by adding ethical and environmental meaning to an already prestigious sector. It allows France to project not only aesthetic refinement but also regulatory responsibility and ecological awareness. Sustainable fashion can therefore be understood as a qualified soft power resource because it brings together culture, values, and policy credibility in a single diplomatic narrative.

Thus, sustainable fashion should be treated as a source of French soft power in a qualified and evidence-based sense. It does not prove that France has automatically increased its global influence. Instead, the available evidence suggests that sustainable fashion operates as a strategic mechanism through which France seeks to align one of its most powerful cultural industries with globally valued sustainability norms. The Global Soft Power Index 2025 provides a macro-level context, while France's fashion-related initiatives provide sectoral examples of how environmental credibility may be projected through public diplomacy.

Fashion as an Instrument of State Public Diplomacy

If the previous section established sustainable fashion as a potential soft power resource, this section explains how that resource is communicated. Sustainable fashion is understood here not merely as an industrial practice or domestic environmental policy, but as an instrument of state public diplomacy. It operates through a transmission chain: sustainability regulation → international communication and media exposure → global public interpretation → soft power accumulation → potential diplomatic influence. Influence does not emerge from policy alone, but from how policy is communicated, mediated, interpreted, and attached to national reputation.

The first stage in this chain is the conversion of domestic regulation into international communication content. Policies such as the AGEC Law, The Fashion Pact, and anti-fast fashion regulation do not only govern the domestic market. They also communicate how France seeks to be perceived globally: not simply as the center of haute couture and luxury fashion, but as a state that links cultural prestige with environmental responsibility. When domestic regulation addresses global concerns such as climate change, overconsumption, textile waste, and ethical production, it becomes more than law. It becomes a public diplomacy asset.

The AGEC Law illustrates this communicative function. Rather than revisiting its technical provisions in detail, the key point is how the law enables France to frame fashion governance as part of a broader environmental responsibility agenda. In a sector often criticized for overproduction, unsold inventory, and textile waste, the regulation offers France a concrete basis for claiming that sustainability is not merely a brand narrative but also a matter of governance (République Française, 2020). This is where regulation

begins to operate diplomatically: it turns a domestic legal framework into an internationally legible signal of credibility.

The second stage is the transformation of regulation into international media exposure. French sustainability regulation has attracted international attention because it challenges market-driven assumptions about fashion governance and raises broader questions about the environmental cost of consumption. International coverage, including Vogue Business's discussion of how France "laid down the law on sustainability," frames France as an actor imposing transparency and traceability demands on fashion brands operating in its market (Vogue Business, 2022). These transparency demands are reinforced by France's implementing regulation on consumer information concerning the environmental qualities and characteristics of waste-generating products (France, 2022). Similar coverage of France's anti-fast fashion measures presents the country as one of the major fashion markets willing to confront disposable consumption through penalties, advertising restrictions, and transparency requirements (Sénat Français, 2025). Through such coverage, domestic regulation is translated into a global narrative: France is not only producing fashion but also attempting to shape how fashion should be governed.

Melissen's concept of new public diplomacy and Cull's typology help explain why fashion can operate as public diplomacy. Contemporary public diplomacy engages foreign publics through networks, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, and mediated communication (Melissen, 2005; Cull, 2008). France does not communicate sustainability only through official diplomatic statements. It does so through regulation, fashion institutions, designers, luxury brands, global industry platforms, and international media circulation. Sustainable fashion diplomacy therefore works through a combination of policy performance and symbolic communication: policy provides credibility, while media and industry networks extend the narrative's reach.

The third stage is the formation of global public interpretation. This should not be understood as an immediate or fully measurable transformation caused by a single law. Rather, international media exposure creates a new interpretive space for the French national image. Historically, France has been associated with luxury, aesthetics, haute couture, and Paris Fashion Week. Sustainability narratives expand this association by positioning France not only as a country of cultural prestige but also as a state seeking ethical leadership in fashion governance. The shift is not from luxury to sustainability, but from luxury alone toward luxury combined with environmental responsibility.

This shift matters because soft power depends on credible attraction. If French fashion is understood only as a symbol of prestige, its appeal remains primarily aesthetic and commercial. When fashion is connected to circular economy principles, anti-waste regulation, and criticism of ultra-fast fashion, its appeal gains a normative dimension. France therefore seeks to expand the diplomatic meaning of fashion from a symbol of refinement into a symbol of responsibility. This does not prove that global publics have automatically changed their perception of France. It shows, more cautiously, how France creates the communicative conditions through which such perceptions may be reshaped.

The fourth stage is the accumulation of soft power through narrative credibility. A sustainability narrative becomes more persuasive when it is supported by concrete policies rather than promotional

slogans. Measures such as the prohibition of destroying unsold goods, transparency obligations, consumer information requirements concerning the environmental qualities and characteristics of products, environmental penalties, and restrictions on fast fashion advertising provide material support for the message France seeks to project (France, 2020; France, 2022; Sénat Français, 2025). They reduce the risk that sustainability is read as rhetorical branding and allow it to be interpreted as a policy-backed commitment.

The Fashion Pact strengthens this mechanism by involving non-state actors. Launched in the context of the 2019 G7 Summit in Biarritz, the initiative brought together global fashion and textile companies around commitments to climate, biodiversity, and ocean protection (The Fashion Pact, 2019). Its significance lies in how France positioned itself as a convening actor between the state, industry, and global sustainability agendas. From a public diplomacy perspective, this matters because states increasingly project influence not only through official institutions, but also by mobilizing networks with communicative reach.

The fifth stage concerns the relationship between soft power and diplomatic influence. Diplomatic influence does not mean that other states directly follow France because of one fashion policy. Rather, when France constructs itself consistently as an actor with credibility in sustainability, it may gain normative leverage in debates on circular economy, textile regulation, environmental transparency, and sustainable consumption standards. This influence works indirectly: domestic policy demonstrates commitment, media and industry networks generate visibility, visibility contributes to perceived legitimacy, and legitimacy may support France's position in international debates over sustainability governance.

This transmission chain is not deterministic. The study does not claim that fashion regulation automatically produces diplomatic influence. It identifies a qualitative mechanism through which sustainable fashion policy can operate as public diplomacy. Regulation becomes communication; communication enters media circulation; media circulation shapes interpretive conditions; interpretation contributes to soft power; and soft power may support diplomatic leverage. In this way, sustainable fashion functions as a channel through which domestic policy becomes international communication, communication shapes perception, and perception may become diplomatic capital.

Transnational Networks and Non-State Actors: Amplifying the Visual Narrative of French Eco-Diplomacy

The public diplomacy mechanism described above depends on actors beyond the state. French sustainable fashion diplomacy cannot be understood solely through regulation or formal diplomatic messaging. Its visibility depends on transnational networks and non-state actors that translate state-supported sustainability agendas into corporate, cultural, and visual forms. In the fashion sector, influence is rarely produced through policy language alone. It is mediated through brands, designers, industry coalitions, runway platforms, sustainability reports, visual campaigns, fashion journalism, and digital circulation.

This logic is closely aligned with Melissen's concept of new public diplomacy, which emphasizes that contemporary diplomacy is no longer confined to state-to-state interaction or centralized government communication (Melissen, 2005). In the case of French sustainable fashion, the state does not simply

broadcast an environmental agenda. It facilitates a wider communicative ecosystem in which corporations, fashion institutions, designers, and industry coalitions carry sustainability narratives. France functions less as a sole speaker and more as a convening actor that aligns public authority, cultural prestige, and private-sector visibility around an ecological narrative.

The clearest empirical example of this networked diplomacy is The Fashion Pact. At its launch, the initiative was signed by 32 global fashion and textile companies and focused on three environmental pillars: climate, biodiversity, and oceans (The Fashion Pact, 2019). Its significance lies not only in the environmental commitments themselves but also in the diplomatic form it created. The initiative enabled France to connect state leadership, global fashion corporations, and sustainability governance within one transnational platform. In Melissen's terms, this reflects the movement from rigid, state-centric diplomacy toward a network-based model in which influence is mediated through coalitions with social, cultural, and market reach.

The scale of this coalition strengthens its analytical relevance. The initiative has been reported as expanding from its initial 32 signatories to around 75 companies across 17 countries, representing approximately 160 brands and around 30% of the global fashion industry by volume. The Fashion Pact's own network description similarly refers to more than 50 CEOs, approximately 150 brands, around 20 countries, and roughly one third of the fashion industry by volume (The Fashion Pact, n.d.; Vogue, 2019). These figures should not be interpreted as proof that French public diplomacy has achieved its objectives. Rather, they indicate the breadth of the transnational infrastructure through which France-linked sustainability narratives can circulate.

This scale matters because it demonstrates how public diplomacy works through distributed visibility. A network that includes dozens of companies, more than a hundred global brands, and roughly one third of industry volume does not function like a traditional diplomatic mission. It functions as a dispersed communicative structure. Through corporate reports, brand campaigns, sustainability commitments, industry events, and media visibility, the ecological narrative associated with The Fashion Pact travels across markets and publics that formal diplomatic communication would rarely reach directly. The diplomatic relevance of The Fashion Pact therefore lies not in state control but in network orchestration.

The participation of major corporate actors reinforces this amplification. The Fashion Pact has been associated with groups and brands such as Kering, Inditex, H&M Group, Ralph Lauren, and Prada (The Fashion Pact, n.d.). These companies operate across global supply chains, consumer markets, media ecosystems, and cultural imaginaries. Their involvement allows sustainability commitments to travel through commercial and symbolic channels that are often more accessible to international publics than formal state diplomacy. Non-state actors do not simply support French diplomacy; they broaden the arenas in which France's ecological fashion narrative becomes visible, contested, and culturally recognizable.

Nye's concept of soft power helps explain why this corporate participation is diplomatically relevant. Soft power resources become effective when culture, values, and policies are perceived as attractive and credible by others (Nye, 2004). In this context, the involvement of major fashion corporations can strengthen

the credibility of France's ecological fashion narrative because it suggests that sustainability is not confined to government rhetoric. At the same time, corporate participation should not be treated as automatic validation. These actors also operate within commercial systems shaped by consumption, exclusivity, and competitive branding.

Kering Group provides an important example of this credibility mechanism. The company was central to the early development of The Fashion Pact, with François-Henri Pinault called upon by President Emmanuel Macron to mobilize fashion industry commitments in the context of the G7 process (The Fashion Pact, 2019). Beyond symbolic leadership, Kering has developed the Environmental Profit and Loss account (EP&L) as a tool to quantify, monitor, and communicate the environmental footprint of its activities across the value chain. The EP&L covers indicators such as greenhouse gas emissions, air emissions, water pollution, water consumption, waste production, and land use (Kering, n.d.).

From a Nye perspective, the EP&L links attraction to credibility. French luxury fashion already possesses strong symbolic capital, but symbolic capital alone is insufficient in an era of environmental scrutiny. The EP&L gives sustainability claims a more measurable basis than branding language alone. It does not resolve all tensions between luxury consumption and ecological responsibility, but it provides a mechanism through which a major French corporate actor can demonstrate environmental accountability. Kering's role therefore helps bridge French fashion as a cultural symbol and French fashion as a field of environmental governance.

Paris Fashion Week provides another arena through which non-state and institutional actors amplify France's eco-diplomatic narrative. As one of the most visible fashion platforms in the world, it offers a stage on which sustainability themes can be transformed into aesthetic and symbolic narratives. The Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode has introduced a common framework for eco-scenography at Paris Fashion Week events, consisting of 75 criteria designed to help production teams integrate eco-design principles into show production. The framework forms part of actions undertaken since 2019 in areas such as transport, venue sharing, waste management, and material reuse (Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode, n.d.).

These measures do not prove that Paris Fashion Week has become fully sustainable. Their significance lies in showing that sustainability is increasingly embedded into the event infrastructure through which French fashion becomes globally visible. Paris Fashion Week does not merely display clothing; it organizes relationships among designers, media, brands, buyers, celebrities, influencers, and global audiences. When sustainability criteria enter this infrastructure, ecological responsibility becomes part of the visual and institutional language through which French fashion is presented internationally.

International fashion media further amplify this process. Vogue's coverage of The Fashion Pact, for example, reported that around 150 brands joined Emmanuel Macron's Fashion Pact to make the fashion industry more sustainable, highlighting science-based commitments on global warming, biodiversity restoration, and ocean protection (Vogue, 2019). Such coverage does not prove the effectiveness of French diplomacy, but it shows how initiatives involving French leadership and non-state actors become part of

international fashion discourse. Through media circulation, environmental commitments are reframed as culturally relevant stories that travel among fashion publics, consumers, industry professionals, and observers beyond France.

The overall contribution of transnational networks and non-state actors lies in their ability to move sustainability from the language of policy into the language of culture. The Fashion Pact provides a platform of corporate coordination; Kering's EP&L provides an example of environmental accountability within French luxury; Paris Fashion Week provides a visual stage; the Fédération provides institutional infrastructure; and fashion media provide channels of cultural circulation. Together, these actors form a communicative ecosystem in which French eco-diplomacy can be translated into images, practices, events, and narratives that travel beyond the state.

Therefore, fashion should not be read as a simple extension of state power, but as a networked cultural field through which state-supported sustainability agendas are amplified, mediated, and contested. Through Melissen's lens, The Fashion Pact demonstrates how French public diplomacy increasingly operates through networks rather than state messaging alone. Through Nye's framework, corporate actors such as Kering show how credibility can strengthen the attractiveness of sustainability narratives, while Paris Fashion Week and international fashion media show how ecological commitments can become globally visible cultural communication.

The Repositioning of French National Identity: From Aesthetic Hegemony to Ecological Stewardship

The preceding sections show how sustainable fashion operates as a soft power resource, a public diplomacy mechanism, and a networked communicative field. This section turns to the identity effect of that process: how France uses sustainability to reposition the meaning of its fashion identity from aesthetic hegemony toward ecological stewardship. The focus is not to restate France's long-standing status as a global fashion center, but to analyze how that status is being recalibrated under conditions of climate anxiety, overconsumption, and growing scrutiny of fashion's environmental costs.

The identity being repositioned may be understood as aesthetic hegemony: France's symbolic authority in defining elegance, prestige, refinement, and luxury value. This identity has long functioned as a reputational asset, but under contemporary sustainability norms it has also become more ambivalent. Luxury fashion may still generate admiration, yet it can invite criticism when associated with excess, exclusivity, overproduction, and environmentally costly consumption. The issue is therefore not that France's aesthetic authority has disappeared, but that aesthetic prestige alone is no longer sufficient unless it is connected to credible ecological responsibility.

Simon Anholt's argument on national reputation is useful for understanding this shift. Anholt warns against treating nation branding as promotional slogans, image campaigns, or surface-level symbolic management. A country's reputation is shaped more durably by what it does, how it behaves, and whether its policies correspond to the identity it seeks to project (Anholt, 2007; Anholt, 2010). Applied to this case, France's repositioning cannot rest merely on claiming that French fashion is sustainable. It requires visible policy action through which sustainability can be interpreted as part of national conduct. The move from

aesthetic hegemony to ecological stewardship therefore depends on substantive governance rather than branding vocabulary.

The AGECE Law is central to this repositioning because it recodes French fashion from a culture of linear consumption toward a culture of circularity. By targeting practices such as the destruction of unsold goods and by promoting circular economy principles, the law attaches ecological responsibility to a sector historically associated with aesthetic distinction (République Française, 2020). Its symbolic importance lies in this identity shift: French fashion is no longer positioned only as beautiful, desirable, or prestigious, but also as accountable to environmental limits. The law should not be read as single-handedly transforming French fashion identity. Rather, it functions as a policy marker through which France attempts to make its ecological repositioning observable.

The regulation of fast fashion and ultra-fast fashion further sharpens this repositioning by operating as a form of differentiation. These policies allow France to distinguish its fashion identity from a global model of rapid, disposable, and low-cost consumption. Ultra-fast fashion represents speed, volume, algorithmic demand, and accelerated disposability. France's response, by contrast, attempts to associate its fashion identity with durability, transparency, restraint, and environmental accountability (France, 2022). This does not mean that France has fully moved beyond consumption-based fashion. Rather, it suggests that France is renegotiating the symbolic hierarchy of fashion: aesthetic superiority remains important, but ecological credibility becomes an additional marker of authority.

This transformation can be described as a move toward ecological stewardship, understood not as an achieved status but as an identity project. In the older identity, France's authority came from defining what was elegant. In the emerging identity, France seeks to claim relevance by helping define what is responsible, durable, and ethically defensible in fashion governance. Limited references to initiatives such as The Fashion Pact and Paris Fashion Week should be understood within this broader shift, but the analytical focus here remains the changing meaning of French fashion identity itself.

The theoretical consequence of this repositioning is closely related to Nye's concept of attraction and credibility. France's traditional fashion appeal has long rested on beauty, prestige, and cultural authority. Sustainability adds another layer of attraction by linking that authority to ecological responsibility. The shift is therefore not from fashion to environment, but from aesthetic attraction to ethically inflected attraction. If French fashion remains associated only with exclusivity and consumption, its appeal may narrow in an era increasingly concerned with climate responsibility. By contrast, when France links fashion to circularity, anti-waste governance, and resistance to disposable consumption, it expands the moral vocabulary of its soft power.

This new attraction remains conditional. Nye's framework suggests that cultural resources become politically valuable only when they are perceived as legitimate and credible. France cannot simply declare that its fashion identity has become ecological; it must sustain that claim through consistent policy, transparency, and institutional practice. This is why the AGECE Law and anti-fast fashion measures are analytically important: they provide policy substance that supports the identity shift. Yet they should still be

read as part of an ongoing repositioning process, not as definitive proof that France has resolved the contradictions of fashion sustainability.

Anholt and Nye are therefore complementary in this analysis. Anholt clarifies that national reputation is built through substantive conduct rather than cosmetic branding. Nye explains why such conduct matters for international attraction. Together, they show that French sustainable fashion diplomacy is not simply about improving an image, but about restructuring the relationship between identity, policy, and attraction. The reputational question is whether France's fashion identity can be read as credible in an ecological era. The soft power question is whether this reinterpreted identity can generate attraction beyond traditional luxury audiences.

At the same time, the analysis must remain cautious. France's repositioning is neither complete nor uncontested. The luxury fashion sector still contains contradictions between sustainability, exclusivity, global supply chains, and consumer desire. Ecological stewardship should therefore be understood as an aspirational and strategic identity project rather than an achieved status. Its significance lies in the direction of the repositioning: France is trying to prevent aesthetic hegemony from becoming a reputational liability by embedding ecological responsibility into the meaning of French fashion.

Ultimately, the shift from aesthetic hegemony to ecological stewardship represents an attempt to renew France's national identity in the fashion sector. Through Anholt's lens, this renewal is credible only insofar as it is supported by substantive policy rather than branding rhetoric. Through Nye's lens, it matters because it expands the basis of French attraction from aesthetic superiority toward ethical relevance. Sustainable fashion diplomacy should therefore not be read as final evidence that France has become an ecological leader, but as a strategic effort to transform inherited cultural prestige into a more contemporary form of soft power.

Challenges and Critical Dimensions of France's Sustainable Fashion Diplomacy

The previous sections show how France attempts to transform sustainable fashion into soft power, public diplomacy, networked visibility, and identity repositioning. However, this diplomatic narrative remains persuasive only if its credibility survives two systemic pressure points: the gap between ecological narratives and luxury-industry practices, and the risk that environmental regulation is perceived abroad as selective economic protectionism. These challenges strike at the core of contemporary soft power and public diplomacy. In Nye's terms, attraction depends fundamentally on credibility. Once projected values appear inconsistent with corporate and material realities, soft power resources may become sources of suspicion. In Melissen's framework, public diplomacy operates within non-linear networks of foreign publics, transnational firms, and media ecosystems. Assertive domestic policies, even when normatively justified, can generate resistance when external stakeholders perceive them as exclusionary, self-serving, or structurally asymmetrical.

Greenwashing and the Threat to Soft Power Credibility. The first challenge concerns the vulnerability of state credibility to accusations of corporate greenwashing. France's eco-diplomatic narrative depends on the claim that the fashion ecosystem can be reoriented toward circularity and environmental

stewardship. However, this projection confronts the material realities of the French luxury sector. Conglomerates such as Kering and LVMH anchor France's global fashion identity, but they also operate through complex transnational supply chains, high-volume distribution, resource-intensive production, and carbon-heavy logistics. This misalignment exposes France's national image to scrutiny over whether its foundational industries embody the ecological values projected by state diplomacy.

From a Nye perspective, this gap directly affects the conversion of cultural resources into soft power attraction. Soft power is not generated through self-description alone, but through perceived credibility. French luxury groups have institutionalized environmental frameworks, including Kering's EP&L and LVMH's LIFE 360 roadmap, yet these commitments coexist with commercial imperatives for continued expansion (Kering, n.d.; LVMH, n.d.). Critics, including *The Business of Fashion*, have highlighted this paradox by noting that luxury conglomerates may report reductions in emissions intensity while absolute environmental pressures continue to scale alongside rising revenues (*The Business of Fashion*, 2024).

France's regulatory framework on consumer information concerning the environmental qualities and characteristics of products is therefore relevant to this credibility problem, as it seeks to make environmental claims more visible, verifiable, and accountable (France, 2022). However, regulation alone does not eliminate the reputational risk of greenwashing. When international audiences interpret sustainability claims as commercial public relations rather than environmental mitigation, the state's diplomatic narrative becomes vulnerable to accusations of hypocrisy. In Nye's framework, credibility is the condition that transforms a national asset into legitimate attraction. If French luxury fashion is perceived as aesthetically green but materially carbon-intensive, its usefulness as a soft power resource becomes compromised. In this case, fashion may shift from an object of admiration into a target of external skepticism.

Eco-Protectionism and the Paradox of Networked Public Diplomacy. The second challenge concerns the geopolitical reception of environmental mandates. Within a networked global economy, domestic legislation is simultaneously interpreted by foreign publics, platform companies, and trading partners that may contest the state's intent. This friction is visible in France's legislative efforts to penalize the ultra-fast fashion sector. The French Senate's approval of targeted regulations, including an environmental index system, advertising restrictions, and progressive penalties reaching up to €10 per item by 2030, specifically affects hyper-scalable e-commerce platforms such as Shein and Temu (Sénat Français, 2025).

Although domestically framed as climate policy designed to curb overproduction and textile waste, the measure enters a contested geopolitical arena internationally. Because these regulations may be perceived as disproportionately affecting Asian-based ultra-fast fashion platforms while leaving high-margin European luxury actors less directly targeted, foreign state and market actors may decode the policy as eco-protectionism: the strategic deployment of environmental standards to shield domestic industries from hyper-competitive external actors. This perception does not necessarily invalidate the environmental rationale of the policy, but it complicates its diplomatic reception.

This interpretive conflict is further shaped by class and consumer politics. Ultra-fast fashion entities have attempted to neutralize French environmental critiques by framing affordable fashion as a democratic

consumer right. For lower-income global consumers, penalties on ultra-fast fashion may appear less as ethical stewardship and more as an elitist restriction on affordability. This dynamic illustrates the paradox of networked public diplomacy: a policy designed to elevate a nation's moral authority can damage its transnational relationships if foreign publics perceive it as paternalistic or economically exclusionary.

In a networked diplomatic environment where legitimacy is negotiated rather than imposed, France's potentially asymmetric enforcement may create a hierarchy of accountability. If low-cost foreign platforms are more directly targeted while carbon-intensive luxury actors remain less constrained, France's claim to ethical consistency becomes more vulnerable. The issue is not whether France should regulate ultra-fast fashion, but whether its environmental standards are applied consistently enough to avoid being read as selective protectionism.

Ultimately, French sustainable fashion diplomacy faces a dual credibility trap. Greenwashing threatens its soft power from within by exposing the possible decoupling of sustainability discourse and luxury corporate practice. Eco-protectionism threatens its public diplomacy from without by provoking resistance among foreign market actors and trading partners. To preserve its persuasive force, France cannot treat eco-diplomacy as communication alone. It requires greater consistency in applying rigorous environmental standards across domestic luxury conglomerates, global digital platforms, and the transnational networks affected by its regulatory reach.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that French sustainable fashion diplomacy can be understood as a strategic attempt to reposition a traditional cultural industry into a contemporary instrument of public diplomacy and soft power. Rather than proving a direct increase in French global influence, the analysis shows that sustainable fashion functions as a qualified soft power resource through which France seeks to connect cultural prestige, regulatory credibility, and environmental responsibility. France does not merely preserve fashion as a symbol of aesthetic hegemony, elite taste, and luxury authority, but attempts to recast it as a field of ecological stewardship.

The findings show that this strategy operates through the interaction of policy, communication, and transnational networks. Domestic measures such as the AGEC Law, The Fashion Pact, and anti-fast fashion regulation provide the policy substance through which France attempts to align fashion prestige with environmental responsibility. This ecological narrative becomes diplomatically meaningful when it is communicated through international media, visual culture, fashion institutions, and industry platforms. In this process, French sustainable fashion diplomacy operates not as a single state campaign, but as a networked process in which regulation, cultural mediation, and non-state participation interact to shape international visibility.

However, this diplomatic narrative remains conditional and contested. Its credibility depends on whether France can maintain coherence between ecological claims, policy implementation, and the material practices of its fashion industry. Greenwashing may weaken the attraction that sustainable fashion is meant to generate, particularly if luxury actors continue to face criticism over supply chains, emissions, overproduction, or selective accountability. Eco-protectionism may also challenge France's public diplomacy

if anti-fast fashion policies are interpreted by foreign platforms, Asian supply-chain actors, or lower-income consumers as selective economic defense rather than environmental governance.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in showing that cultural commodities in the twenty-first century are no longer limited to symbolic representation, commercial branding, or aesthetic distinction. Fashion, as the French case demonstrates, can be reconstructed as a site where culture, environmental norms, public diplomacy, national reputation, and soft power converge. However, ecological stewardship is not achieved through narrative projection alone. It requires coherence between state regulation, corporate practice, and international reception. Future research may extend this analysis by comparing France's sustainable fashion diplomacy with other fashion-producing states to examine whether ecological stewardship is becoming a broader pattern in cultural diplomacy or remains specific to France's distinctive fusion of luxury, regulation, and public diplomacy.

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SHORT PROFILE

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